

Lent 3 March 12th 2023: Sermon: St. Mary the Virgin, Woodbridge

Readings: Exodus 17: 1-7; John 4: 5-42; Rom 5: 1-11; Ps. 95

“And Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.””

God grant that I may speak to you in his name, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN

“If you *knew* the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink”, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” (Jn. 4: 10).

So, how is *your* Lent going? I remember being asked that very question when I was talking with Fr Oswin, our community’s now-superior, about visiting the Community of the Resurrection as an enquirer nearly 8 years ago. And it made me think: Well, what is the answer? What am I supposed to say? Something perhaps to do with prayer or fasting? Maybe something about what I have given up or taken on. How is Lent going? What am I supposed to say?

We in the Christian community – the Church – have come out of the expectation, preparation and waiting of the season of Advent; we have basked in the joyful celebration of Christmastide, with its emphasis on the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ, and seen his identity revealed before the world in the patient arrival of the Magi, whom we recollect at Epiphany. Then, at Candlemas - the sending out of light for the world – God’s revelation of his Christ as the new source of salvation for Jew and gentile is presented in the temple and acclaimed by Simeon as the good news of the age. Now, here we are three weeks into Lent – plunging us as it does from life into death – from Jordan to Jerusalem – from Olivet to Calvary. And I ask you, sanguinely, how is it going? What are you supposed to say? Something to do with prayer or fasting; something about giving up or taking on? Or something else? What are *you* supposed to say? How is *your* Lent going?

The great gift of Lent – and perhaps its greatest torment too – is that it does not allow us to dodge that question: there’s nowhere to run to and no place to hide; there is no blissful ignorance in this holy season; no room for ducking the questions buried deep in the field of ourselves. Prayer, fasting, acts of service and penitence are not in themselves, what the Lord requires of us forasmuch as they might provide bases.

No, we enter, rather, with our Lord into the wide-open space of the wilderness during these with its dangers and snares, and we face them; indeed, we learn the better during these 40 days to deal with our falling into the pit of which the psalmist speaks, because we must in fact dig down into the mire and clay that builds it and muck ourselves out in order to better undergo the graced rescue – the great finding – of the Father’s salvation plan. It is these holy days of discipline that actively displace us from the pretensions of the familiar Judean countryside and brace us for the suspicious foreign territories of Samaria, whose terrain we may neither know nor like very much, but into whose wilderness places we are yet summoned as the remnant of a new and better Exodus. We are to be found here with Jesus in the literal and spiritual places where it is more than “OK not to be OK”, rather it is expected, for it is upon such salvific sites of intentional – even risky pilgrimage - where we freshly encounter the gift of God in the living water of Christ Jesus. Jesus who saves God’s people from their sins by that new baptism of the Holy Spirit and of fire.

Lent invites and impels us to be buried in the holy ground of this world’s desert-places, and to find the springs within, heralding for the whole people of God – the unknown and unremembered particularly - the living water who is both their Saviour and ours.

He it is who mediates a covenant like no other. A covenant whose ways are gentle and peaceable; a law whose letter is love enshrined on hearts not in statute books. He it is whom we are glad to meet once more today as we intersect with the narrative of the unnamed woman at the well, to be discovered, taught and formed as men and women just like her, in sincere compassion and humility by everything that we too, have ever done. Hence Godself bestows upon our hearts and lips today, the very Word of God – the God who asks us to go out into the forgotten corners of Woodbridge and Suffolk – and feed his lambs with himself, quenching all who need it with the living water that will become for all who receive it, a spring welling up and brimming over, into everlasting life.

This gift is not deduced by knowledge, but it is induced in the hope of faith – the unknown following of the desert exile – whose exodus becomes in them a ‘place of springs’ born from above: from that new place of water and spirit that is the life, as

Clement of Rome expresses it, of circumcision. The life that real is freedom of Spirit and truth as Nicodemus encountered it last week.

Lent calls us to that selfsame place – to that eternity of resurrection, that circumcised life of God in the baptised heart of Jesus, our brother and our friend. But I believe you know that already, you who know the gift of God. So you would not have hardened your hearts; you would have asked him for this living water, right?

How is your Lent going?

“Jesus [says] to the woman and – by extension to us - “Give me a drink.””

So as we stand at well once more today, and hear the *Venite* of the psalmist to “hearken to his voice”, what is our answer? What are we supposed to say? what is the fast that I choose while this ‘today’ lasts?

God grant that I have spoken to you in his name, Father Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN